

My care is like my shadow in the sun

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by [middlemarch](#)

Summary

The Little Palace had so much of everything that it was worth considering, very carefully, what was missing. And why.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

The Grisha idea of recreation left much to be desired, in Alina's opinion. It was the Little Palace, perhaps, and how young they'd been when they'd come there, their power the defining aspect of their identities. There were bets and contests, but nearly always related to which Etherealiki could create the brightest flame, the bluest, which Squaller could conjure the softest breeze scented with blossom. They played cards, but simple games, mostly decided by luck, or various tournaments featuring the latest weapon, some new honed dagger or glass-tipped arrow she had yet to see any purpose for. She'd never imagined there could be any part of her life at Keramzin she missed other than Mal, but there were times when she longed for nothing more than a hand of biritch or an hour spent on torguz kumulak, using the largest stones she'd picked out of the day's lentils. She was learning so much, every day filled with lessons and what she discovered simply by watching and listening, but she missed the exercise of strategy, the wonderful sustaining energy of a game being played.

She almost didn't notice the Shatranj board in Aleksander's quarters. It was obscured by a pile of books and some half-rolled maps but her eye was caught by the dancing of a dust mote over the delicate scalloped edge of the white queen. It was almost as though she were back in Keramzin, despite the vast difference in the fineness of the pieces, the tiles of the Aleksander's board made of jewels she didn't have names for. She wondered which of the Fabrikators had made it for him or whether he'd acquired it in some other way, since it was the only one of its kind in the Little Palace as far as she could tell. Now that she knew the Darkling was not only aware of Shatranj but played enough to leave a set out among his papers, she couldn't help puzzling over who he played with and why he hadn't encouraged the game more among his eager acolytes...

She looked around and saw she was alone, at least for the moment, so she stepped closer to look at the arrangement of the pieces on the board and those at either side. She couldn't be sure of the exact order the ones at the side had been taken, but she was familiar enough with the game to guess and to work back some plausible gambits. The players were evenly matched, almost too much so; for every move white had made, black had countered just as boldly, just as evasive when it was necessary. She'd assumed Aleksander was using the black pieces but the white, rendered in some stuff that had the warmth of ivory but the weight of pearl, had executed a sequence of moves she felt she almost recognized from conversations they'd had. She studied the placement of the king, the black queen, the aufin and the few remaining pawns, a smile curving her lips as she moved the black queen to an adjoining square, feeling the light she carried in her finger-tips flare at the touch of the queen's fur-trimmed pelerine.

"You play," he said. She hadn't heard a door open but he was like that, could move as swiftly and silently as the shadows he commanded. He hadn't been asking her a question with the remark, but she could still make out the inquiry at its heart—how had an orphan come to learn the game of generals and emperors?

"Not as often as I did," she said, startled, answering him only a little. "It looked like you needed saving. From yourself. You were about to lose your white queen."

The sun was hers to command, but Alina could not remember a time when she'd ever seen someone's face light up as his did then; he was beautiful. This was not about power, about

elements and monsters and who destroyed and who created. He was pleased, delighted by her ability to see the unimaginable, not because she was Grisha but because she was Alina, as he was Aleksander and not only the Darkling.

“Not many people surprise me, Miss Starkov,” he said. She’d never heard her name said that way *Miss Starkov* as if it meant *moya dusha*, as if she was not valued as a student or comrade, a peer but beloved. Cherished. She felt the color rise in her cheeks and dropped her gaze to the board. She saw his hand there, hovering over the king, that elegant, slender hand that could weave shadows. That would bring about his own defeat if she didn’t say something.

“No,” she said softly.

“No?” he repeated. Waited for her to direct him. She reached over to touch the knight, the stallion’s forelock. He followed her, rested his finger on hers as if he would stroke it instead of lifting the black knight to leap forward. He glanced at her and she knew herself to be unique, the only Grisha who might instruct the Darkling.

“Check,” she said. “Mate in two.”

“Would you play with me?” he asked. “A proper game, with a proper challenger.”

“Is that me?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, actually,” he said. “As you are the better player.”

“I’m not—”

“You know who you are, Alina,” he said, those dark eyes of his looking at her so seriously, so intently. “But I think I can give you a good game. I think you’d enjoy yourself.”

“When?” she asked.

“Have an early dinner with me,” he said. “Then we’ll have enough time to play without you staying up too late. I wouldn’t want to make Master Botkin angry if you’re yawning.”

“Will you be having herring?” Alina asked. It was a staple of the Little Palace evening menu and despite her healthy appetite, she loathed it.

“No, no herring,” he said. “But there will be honey-cake.”

“Then I agree,” she said. “I would have, even without the honey-cake.”

End Notes

Title is from Elizabeth I.

Biritch is the Russian name for the card game contract bridge.

Toguz korgool (Kyrgyz: тогуз коргоол - "nine sheep droppings") or toguz kumalak (Kazakh: төгүз құмалак), is a two-player game in the mancala family that is played in Central Asia.

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